

UNIVERSITY AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY FROM CARE ETHICS¹

Universidad y sostenibilidad social desde la ética del cuidado

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ABSTRACT

The mission of the university includes rising to the challenges of each historical moment, and, as far as teaching is concerned, offering rigorous and up-to-date training in each specific professional profile. The aim of this article is to consider and reflect on which narratives, old promises and false myths are unsustainable because they perpetuate waste, inequality and domination. In order to identify the current challenges, in this article we use the critical hermeneutics methodology. This allows us to establish that inequality, exclusion, climate injustice, neo-liberal imperialism, corruption, destruction of the biosphere and many other problems are the consequence of unsustainable models. The article discusses which other perspectives and narratives might offer better tools for moving towards social sustainability.

We conclude that the university can find in care ethics catalysing elements to nurture the transition towards sustainability and social justice. This is a relational ethics capable of creating connections to overcome the dominant impositions, isolation and fear that silence certain voices. We need a university education that reconstructs these silences and activates forms of competent professional participation (in ethical and technical terms). In this way, we will be in a better position to build a democracy that takes into account the real needs of all people and reorients educational, social, scientific, business, labour, fiscal and economic models to achieve the shift towards the sustainability that we need.

Keywords: care ethics; sustainability; university; employability; social justice.

RESUMEN

La misión de la universidad incluye el dar respuesta a los retos de cada momento histórico; y, en lo que concierne a la docencia, ofrecer una formación rigurosa y actualizada en cada perfil profesional específico. El objetivo del artículo es plantear y reflexionar sobre qué relatos, viejas promesas, y falsos mitos resultan insostenibles porque perpetúan el despilfarro, la desigualdad y la dominación. Para identificar cuáles son los retos actuales, en este artículo utilizamos el método de la hermenéutica-crítica. Lo que nos permite desentrañar que la desigualdad, la exclusión, la injusticia climática, el imperialismo neoliberal, la corrupción, la destrucción de la biosfera y otros tantos problemas son consecuencia de modelos insostenibles. El artículo analiza qué otras perspectivas y relatos podrían ofrecer mejores herramientas para avanzar hacia la sostenibilidad social.

Concluimos afirmando que la universidad puede encontrar en la ética del cuidado elementos catalizadores para nutrir la transición hacia la sostenibilidad y la justicia social. Se trata de una ética relacional capaz de crear conexiones para superar las imposiciones dominantes, el aislamiento social y los miedos que silencian ciertas voces. Necesitamos una formación universitaria que reconstruya estos silencios y que active formas de participación profesional competente (en términos éticos y técnicos). Así, estaremos en mejores condiciones para construir una democracia que tenga en cuenta las necesidades reales de todas las personas y reorienta los modelos

educativos, sociales, científicos, empresariales, laborales, fiscales y económicos para conseguir el viraje hacia la sostenibilidad que necesitamos.

Palabras clave: ética del cuidado; sostenibilidad; universidad; empleabilidad; justicia social.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of universities include preparing people for employment, as well as educating in the ethical dimension of a critical citizenship and familiarising students with the cultural and historical roots of the tradition in which they are embedded. There is also a fundamental objective of providing training in the competences of the professional profile of each specific qualification. Ortega y Gasset in his celebrated work *Misión de la Universidad* [Mission of the university] bases his argument on the claim that the university should train technically and ethically competent professionals and teach culture. By culture, he means the system of vital ideas each period possesses:

These ideas, which I call vital or lived, are no more and no less than the repertoire of our true convictions about what the world is and our fellow beings are, about the hierarchy of values of things and actions: which are estimable and which are not. (Ortega, 1930, p. 341, own translation)

It is important to adopt a critical stance when facing these vital ideas to analyse whether we agree with them or should reject them because they do not respond to the needs of our lives. What are the vital ideas of this first quarter of the twenty-first century that should be rigorously analysed? What are the challenges of the twenty-first century that the university should critically question? In our view, these are: the dominance of the economy; globalisation; the knowledge society; digitalisation and artificial intelligence; the complexity and multicultural nature of our societies; inequality; public disaffection with the powers of the state and the institutions that wield them; the sustainability of economic, social and environmental systems; and concerns about the fragility of the world and human vulnerability (Escámez & Peris, 2021).

The university is currently called upon to exercise leadership in the digital and ecological transition. But the question of social sustainability is not free from ethical conflicts (Franck & Osbeck, 2018). There is an increasingly clear need to change the current model of *progress* and move towards one that is more sustainable for the life of people and the planet we inhabit.

From the university sector we can contribute elements for reconsidering which model of *progress* puts us in the best position for a universal common good, how to guide teaching and research methods, where to attract funding that generates social justice, and also ask ourselves to whose benefit we work. Part of the challenge we

face is understanding that to reverse the devastating effects of the model of *progress* that has led us to our current position, we need to hear other voices that make it possible to understand and appreciate other interpretations and other narratives that enable prudent management of our own vulnerability and the activation of innovative social, business, work, tax and economic models.

How can we motivate students to critically reflect on human centeredness and the interdependency of living and non-living things? How can we encourage learners to identify and question their own values, beliefs, and/or worldviews underpinning anthropocentric practices and lifestyles? (Tillmanns, 2020, p.14)

Hans Jonas (1995) speaks of the ethical void of our time. Ethics must exist. And they must exist because people and human organisations act, and ethics exist to order actions and control their power. The more powerful the action they must control, the more the need for them to exist. Therefore, new capacities for action require new ethical rules and perhaps a new ethics. It is vital to consider how to stimulate other ways of managing ourselves at both the macro and micro levels, since the health of people and the health of the planet are two elements in reciprocal interaction.

The purpose of development is to improve the life of individuals and that individuals are not the instruments of economic development, on the contrary, economic development should function and be an instrument in service of human beings (Yoo, Mosrur, Lee & Toca Andrea, 2019, p. 269).

It is increasingly common to encounter works that find elements of interest in care ethics for the developing their lines of research in university settings (Aloni, 2020; Bozalek, McMillan, Marshall, November, Daniels & Sylvester, 2014; Bergland, 2018; Done, Murphy, & Knowler, 2016; Gachago, & Livingston, 2020; Lolich, & Lynch, 2017; Lottero-Perdue, & Settlege, 2021; Lu, 2018; Vázquez, 2019). Joan Tronto (2015) notes that although we usually think of the sphere of care and the sphere of politics as separate and requiring different logics, in reality they both have political implications.

2. METHODOLOGY FOR INTERPRETING THE PROBLEMS ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE

To address the question of whether care ethics can offer other narratives or interpretations about which living ideas or challenges currently need our attention, we used hermeneutic criticism. Research methods must fit the object being researched. However, research methods nowadays seem to have become enshrined in themselves, turning into unquestionable dogmas with insufficient rigour for understanding the complexity of the human being. Two methods appear to vie for predominance in the study of the person: a) mentalism, which does not consider the data provided by current neurobiological sciences; and b) naturalism, which

reduces knowledge of what is human to contributions from the empirical natural sciences (such as neurosciences).

In our opinion, both of these methods are reductionist. We share the theses advocated by Jesús Conill (2019, p. 190) when he argues that we must take the natural, social, historical and human sciences into account when interpreting the human being if we are to understand it. This method, which he calls hermeneutic criticism, has a strong tradition in modern anthropology (Taylor, Ricoeur, MacIntyre, Apel, Habermas) and in the thought of Spanish authors such as Ortega y Gasset and in particular Zubiri whose book *Sobre el hombre* [On man] (1986) brings together many of his writings on the connection between philosophy and science, which Ignacio Ellacuría, Pedro Laín, Diego Gracia and López Aranguren later covered in more depth in their attempts to provide a biological foundation for ethics.

In short, Zubiri's noological path and the hermeneutic criticism of Apel, Habermas and Cortina are more productive for interpreting the reality of the human person than the reductionism of naturalist positivism with its excess faith in science or Heidegger's phenomenological factualism, which is disconnected from scientific thinking and he world of values (Conill, 2019, p. 216).

Hermeneutic criticism helps introduce the possibility of different interpretations, as well as analysis of concrete situations, to produce reflections of and from other interpretations and narratives.

3. WHAT CONCERNS THE PEOPLE WHO FORM PART OF UNIVERSITIES?

A growing number of initiatives in the field of university teaching consider care ethics, which are manifested in research, conferences and teaching innovation projects (for example: Mut, Vázquez & Belda, 2021). In general, it is apparent that students and teachers alike are concerned with being able to meet the requirements that the employment and university context currently impose regarding accountability and competitiveness, but they also want to find a meaning for their endeavour in relational terms. Accordingly, a cross-sectional study in three higher education institutions in Dublin (Ireland) that explored students' aspirations found that the three most highly valued factors were "becoming an expert in my field", "helping other who have difficulties" and "starting a family" (Lolich & Lynch, 2017). With regards to teachers, studies have also shown that there are proposals among university teachers to resist neo-liberal university cultures (Done, Murphy & Knowler, 2016).

A study at a Spanish university based on in-depth interviews with 40 people transitioning from university to the world of work in different areas of knowledge (healthcare, engineering and architecture, social and legal sciences, arts and humanities) gives an account of several of the mechanisms that prevent full inclusion (Tenorio, González & Padilla, 2021): The subjects of this research identify a need to undo versions of employability that are pervaded by neo-liberal imperatives and to

reveal the underlying mechanisms that reproduce relations of power and go against the true mission of the university.

On the same lines, Tronto (2017) also reflects on neo-liberalism's impact on how we organise our individual and collective lives, and how liberalism ensures that the shortfalls we face in satisfying demands for care are treated as individual failings rather than failures of collective responsibility. Accordingly, she identifies several limitations of neo-liberal culture for meeting the needs of citizens: there is a reluctance to accept responsibility for anything that is not one's own; the ability to think of care outside the home is restricted; and market and instrumentalist rationales eclipse people's most real aspirations.

It is necessary to review epistemological and axiological suppositions and go into greater depth in making human vulnerability and interdependencies visible at the planetary and interpersonal level (Bonnett, 2017). The lack of recognition of our reciprocal interdependencies cannot continue. Disregard for care work results in a lack of democracy. The disdain for the time needed for replenishment in natural cycles (such as hydrocarbon deposits, minerals, clean water, pollination, etc.) or towards the impacts of pollution and harmful emissions are a consequence of our vanity. We need to appreciate that the *externalities* of our economic metabolism result in and are the cause of destruction and poverty. Economic models that appropriate what they regard as free and infinite natural resources are outmoded. So, the challenges that the circular economy must overcome from care ethics are also being considered (Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019).

Ultimately, people are increasingly concerned by all of these questions relating to our environmental and inter-dependencies, not just in university management policies but also in research questions, and curriculum content, methodologies and competences. Participation by universities must include a very dense fabric of thought, affect, reflection and commitment, which until now has been underappreciated (Limón, Solís & Pabón, 2021). This type of wisdom must be recognised as a human cultural creation and dedicated to all of the flow of knowledge of humankind.

4. CARE ETHICS

In view of the above, we find the anthropological model of the *homo curans* proposed by Tronto (2017) especially interesting. A narrative or interpretation of the human being as a relational being traversed by care, which compels a type of relations based on reciprocal recognition. Constructing a type of link that makes invisibility, disregard and indifference impossible. Recognition of the dignity in each human being motivates us to seek alliances in order to sustain life and jointly confront the vulnerability we share. There are initiatives that call for another way of being and doing (Bergland, 2018). We can work to build a university that brings us closer to the everyday issues that concern us as humankind, and make the work of universities into something aimed at creating the social, political, environmental

and economic conditions that enable us to live in way that is more human and shows more respect for sustainability. It is a matter of understanding that calling for a model of democracy that matches up to people's real needs requires the democratisation of care.

According to the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (1984), the semantics of the word *cuidar* (to care) – which it shares with the related words *cuidado* (care), *cuidadoso* (careful), *cuidador* (carer) and *cuidadosamente* (carefully) – refer to the diligence and attention that are necessary to do something well and/or do good for people, society and its institutions, and nature. Fundamentally *caring* involves: a) favourable dispositions or feelings (attitudes) to avoid harming oneself and/or the other and to empower the good of oneself and/or the other; and b) generating actions that react in consequence.

In her work *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan explains how, in the conceptual framework of moral theories, philosophers basically discuss whether ethics are based on reason or on emotion. And moral psychologists speak of the self as a being separated from others and from the world; and they conceive moral development as a transition from dependence to independence. The *different voice* she discovers in her research is one that combines reason and emotion and perceives the self in relation to others and to the world. In people's narratives about moral problems, their lives were connected and were interdependent. From this perspective, the converse of dependence was isolation, which she describes as the great moral and psychological pain of people.

In 1993 Tronto and Berenice Fisher in *Moral Boundaries* identified four principal phases in care: attentiveness, listening, responsibility and responsiveness. In *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice* (2013, pp. 34–35), Tronto later added a fifth element to these four ethical phases: plurality, communication, trust and respect (or *caring with*). This fifth phase is in some way the consequence of care ethics being a relational ethics; and it is what allows a democratisation in terms of redistributory justice and of the assumption of the collective capacity to act. In a later text, she set out these five phases:

The first four phases of care imagined a citizen as someone who is attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive; “caring-with” is our new democratic ideal. What makes care equal is not the perfection of an individual caring act, but that we can trust that over time, we will be able to reciprocate the care we received from fellow citizens, and that they will reciprocate the care we've given to them. (Tronto, 2015, p. 14)

The five phases in the practice of care are the beacons (or the compass) that can guide this change in narrative that we need. Hermeneutic criticism of different texts and experiences enables us to offer other interpretations of and from voices that remained subordinated until recently.

4.1. *Cultivation of feelings*

Care ethics implies attention and respect for the vulnerable other and for a fragile world. The first phase of this ethics is sensitivity to the needs that are revealed to us, which demand attention and not indifference in a historical period in which a narcissistic and pathologically enlarged self prevails and is cultivated and exploited by neo-liberal relations of production to increase productivity, regardless of any deleterious effects this might have for other people and for the Earth. Therefore, in science, technology and society as fields of research, attention is also being drawn to the need to take activist feelings into account; consequently, the political dimension of these areas of research has been recognised and a four-stage model for socio-political action has been developed (Hodson, 2020). And also, the experience developed in the area of engineering to introduce affective experiences and care ethics (Lottero-Perdue & Settlage, 2021).

Wishes, feelings, emotions, what classical thinkers called passions, are fundamental for care. At present, the so-called socio-emotional competences are demanding a central position in the formation of university curricula. And they are even linked to serving the community (Santos Rego, Mella-Núñez & García-Álvarez, 2021). Tending towards other things is typical of any living being, and this tendency always has basic affective signals: pleasure, pain, happiness and sadness, affection and fear. They are the basis of the most elemental psychological activity. Human beings are inhabitants of this Earth, and everything they do and seek is loaded with passions. It is necessary to go back to consider life starting from the other and from what is other, prioritising it in relations with the self.

Respectful attention transforms what seemed like merely an example of the human species into a unique person; nothing in it is now banal; a slight smile can reveal more than the conduct of a whole life. In each of the beings that care and are cared for, attention multiplies the wealth of the world; it is no longer one world but rather two worlds in connection; the comprehension of reality acquires a dimension of profundity. When we respect the other, we recognise its personal identity as its own, original and non-transferable. Only in this way is it possible for the cared-for person to be considered as an end in itself and not a means to achieve an end, to recognise the person's dignity and autonomy to be and act in accordance with values that are worth the effort are recognised. Only people capable of caring for themselves can care for others; only people with self-respect and who value themselves can respect and value others. To feel and understand other people, it is necessary to have a clear awareness of one's own personal dignity. So, the "forgetting of the vital" (Gil y Navajas, 2021, own translation) is questioned.

4.2. *Listening*

An attitude of listening is therefore necessary as a second phase in care ethics. Care ethics insists on the need to listen to those who need care. It is an ethics of cases, in which each cared-for person presents his or her specific needs, if the chance to do so arises. Listening is not a passive activity, but a receptive one. It is the only thing that helps other people express their true thoughts. In a way, listening precedes the word.

Listening also has a public dimension as participation in the existence of others, in their happiness and their suffering. It is what links and mediates between people so that they form a community. The patriarchy's strategy of command involves privatisation of care, preventing its socialisation and politicisation or its move from the private to the public (Han, 2017). Nonetheless, the political will to shape a public space, a community of listening, the political set of listeners is now questioned. In her work *In a Different Voice* and in her publications from 2013 on care ethics Gilligan speaks up against this situation. The true voices of women and children regarding moral development are not heard because they are voices that do not espouse the interests of hierarchisation and of power of the patriarchy. Nor are voices heard that are different from or contradict those that defend hierarchical structures and power in social relations and in normalised research protocols.

Universities are ideal places for liberating one's own voice and for examining the narratives that surround us with value and critical thinking. Authors like Stein (2019, p. 199) invite us to listen to the voices of decolonial thinking to "rethink the stories we tell ourselves about climate change, higher education and our horizons for hope". She suggests that a transformative education should enable and encourage respectful and critical listening to students, organisations and citizens in general in order to question ideas and narratives of modernity that perpetuate a false idea of certainty and predictability, or a right to control or unlimited growth without taking into account the limits of expropriation or exploitation. She suggests listening to different interpretations, which question the narratives of meritocracy, monolithic thinking or absolute independence.

4.3. *The responsibility to take charge*

The third phase in care ethics involves arguing for the responsibility to satisfy the needs of those who require care. This is the antidote to ethical theories centred on personal interest and to the construction of an autonomous self that closes in on itself and ignores the protection, attention and help that all rational beings, and indeed living beings and the Earth as a whole, need as contingent and vulnerable beings.

In Gilligan's view, ethics cannot be understood only in terms of logical reasoning as happens in moral debates on hypothetical dilemmas; this is Gilligan's criticism of her teacher Kohlberg and of Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, which forms the basis of

the thinking of moral liberalism. Among the deficiencies of liberalism, two are especially important: a) it has been unable to contemplate fragility and vulnerability as a reality innate to each person, to human societies and their institutions, to the biotic community and to the earth; b) it poses moral questions or problems referring to abstract, disembodied, faceless individuals. Ethics must at the same time be a way of responding to the needs of others who address us from their fragility (Camps, 2021). Care ethics pose real problems of specific people in specific situations. Based on them, it is harder to disregard the lives that count for little in the current dominant ethical, political and economic theories: precarious lives whose exploitation is not perceived, the lives of those who have no voice because they lack the rights of citizens.

For example, in the context of Portuguese universities, there are voices that call attention to the role and impact of engineering in contemporary society; something that makes it necessary to rethink the teaching of the areas of knowledge it includes to reinforce its objective of being at the service of humankind and the common good (Monteiro *et al.*, 2019). These studies have shown that the dominant conception centres on an economic vision of engineering and professionals that leaves out the sense of connection to humankind, social justice and the common good. Another example in the context of universities in South Africa is that provided by Bozalek and Zembylas (2017, p. 64) in what they called response-able pedagogies. These are “ethico-political practices which incorporate a relational ontology into teaching and learning activities and thus extend their transformative potential”.

4.4. *The urgency of generating specific programmes for care*

The fourth phase of care is the urgency of the response to the needs expressed by the people who need care. The importance of this phase of care has not been sufficiently evidenced. Many examples could be given. We often read or hear news stories such as: a) a hundred thousand people from city X are on the waiting list for an operation; b) hospitals in city Y have been unable to treat old people in care homes for Covid-19; c) there is famine in State Z owing to drought or civil war; d) the leaders of the world’s major countries have committed to restricting global warming to 1.5 degrees by 2030, etc. Nonetheless, commitments to reduce severe poverty, effectively implement human rights, welcome migrants, ensure real equality of women and men in accessing jobs, mitigate climate change and so on that are proposed in speeches and the declarations signed by the political leaders of governments and international institutions are not accompanied by effective economic commitments that make it possible to fulfil these promises to care for specific people.

The perspective of care ethics draws attention to the fact that we always need certain material and physical conditions if we are to flourish in accordance with our needs and interests. In the twenty-first century, we still work with outmoded narratives about an abstract human being detached from any type of biological or

affective need. The ideal of human self-sufficiency undervalues unpaid activities that make a major contribution to the economies of countries and the well-being of their citizens, but are invisible in economic statistics and national accounts because they take place outside the market.

Nonetheless, we consider that care is the great invisible wealth of modern economies, even though it is not distributed not by free agreement but by strong social pressures. As Durán (2018) has shown, based on the Encuesta sobre Cuidados a Dependientes (EDAD, Survey on Caring for Dependants, 2008) carried out in Spain, the work of caring takes its toll on the people who do most of it and it separates them from the workforce. A quarter of Spain's population cannot even consider the possibility of working outside the home: 13 % have had to leave employment, 9 % have reduced their working hours and 22 % have had some other type of problem with work. Households have fallen back on their own unpaid caring resources in response to their needs, and this labour almost always falls to women. This is their wealth and the invisible wealth of the country. Nonetheless, this resource is very often not sufficient, and care must be obtained from public services, volunteers or the market. To buy care on the market, households need income (revenue) or wealth (assets). For 70 % of households, it is impossible to pay a full-time carer (at the national minimum wage) as this would absorb over a third of household income. For the young, the unemployed, old people or migrants this proportion of their income is even higher. If care needs are prioritised to guarantee the well-being of the population, it is necessary to develop new economic perspectives that are not based on unpaid work by women, and new services that are accessible to the majority of homes.

Research projects and sustainability projects have to go beyond obsolete models or narratives so that the actions implemented do not perpetuate the status quo, diluting current urgent needs in programmes that only offer an apparent search for sustainability, without addressing the contradictions. A recent study identified several contradictions that continue to be perpetuated, and which involve narratives counter to the change we need (Stratford & Wals, 2020, p. 989): hiding which current models of economic growth cause the destruction of the environment; claiming that the "usual education" is sufficient; not expanding education for citizenship to global education for peace and inclusion; not investing in training teachers; not putting an end to tax evasion by companies and eliminating subsidies for fossil fuels; denigrating non-hegemonic types of knowledge and traditional local knowledge; not changing study and governance plans; not incentivising universities to produce professionals and research that tackle large-scale systemic challenges through creative thinking and problem-solving; resisting full economic participation by women or minority groups.

4.5. *The democratisation of care*

Authors like Esteban (2017) have observed that the organisation of the labour of physical and emotional care for people corresponds to a particular form of social and economic organisation that plans modes of production and socialisation in which women are pushed towards reproduction and caring for others, and men towards producing goods for the market. In other words, the work of caregiving has traditionally been allocated following hierarchical and relational schemes of power that have released certain people from the work of caring based on their gender, class, race or financial situation. On occasion, a situation can even arise in which the people who do the work of caring use their power in the form of tyranny and emotional blackmail towards the people for whom they “care” (Kittay, 1999).

Tronto suggests altering the conceptualisation of care as something that only involves the carer and the person who receives the care, to broaden the focus. In this way, we can approach with better guarantees the complexity of the underlying social and structural situations and dynamics:

I consider the claim that an important part of democratic caring concerns the breaking down of hierarchical relationships. One starting point for doing so is to undermine the logic of care as dyadic. Care rarely happens between two people, only. And to create opportunities to “triangulate” care also creates opportunities to break up a relentless hierarchy of power. (Tronto, 2013, p. 153)

Too often the people who care for vulnerable people become more vulnerable themselves, owing to stress, reduced job security, reduced income and the impact on their own health. This happens because the work of caring is feminised, domesticated and made invisible. Tronto (1993) developed the concept of *privileged irresponsibility* to describe how the division of work along gender lines and hegemonic social values allows certain individuals to excuse themselves from accepting basic caring responsibilities. We can expand this definition to the unwillingness governments, institutions and businesses have shown and continue to show to acknowledge the reality that all people are vulnerable and that we have a responsibility to take charge individually and collectively for our own vulnerability and that of others. Accordingly, Selma Sevenhuijsen (2003, p. 194) warned of the need to construct new ethical and political frameworks:

Care, as a democratic practice, assumes that the moral orientation of care is part of our daily moral and mental *habitus*. In this respect, caring citizenship includes the right to have time to care, to make, on a daily basis, a place for care.

Therefore, it is necessary to position care as a public good and a civic responsibility. Locating care in the framework of a civil ethics that includes joint responsibility is a mechanism that would prevent mismanagement of the needs for care from resulting in poverty and social and gender injustice. We must reconsider – critically

and in the light of outmoded binary, market and patriarchal rationales – what options are offered to us to resolve care; and what we want and can expect from a truly democratic society. With this intention and in the context of Spain, proposals to implement a system based on the universal right to sufficient care are very interesting (Martínez, Roldán & Sastre, 2018).

5. DISCUSSION

The hermeneutic criticism of the crisis of care in its five ethical phases leads us to consider the discussion of whether the narrative of care ethics could be a catalyst for generating other ways of being and doing university. To approach this question, the contributions that have come from rigorous research from a variety of perspectives in recent years are very stimulating. From the legal perspective, Pau (2020) questions whether there is any legal reason to contrast the ethics of justice with care ethics; and in response develops an argument based on the principle of equality. He analyses how the principle of equality and the principle of care are complementary yet contrasting. The principle of equality calls for equal treatment for all, while the principle of care calls for the opposite: unequal treatment. The reason why these are two contrasting principles is that the former is an objective, abstract, universal principle, since it refers to all people in general, while the latter is a subjective, concrete, particular principle, as it refers to each person in its irrepressible individuality.

Unlike the principle of equality, which is based on the autonomy of all people, the principle of care is based on the opposing premise: the dependence and vulnerability of all of them. The principle of care involves treating all people in accordance with their needs as individuals at each specific moment in their lives. For Pau, both the principle of equality and the principle of care should be framed within a single ethics of justice. There is no reason to set the ethics of justice against care ethics: care is also due in justice. Legislative provisions should include the duty of care. These courageous approaches are not currently usual, as the bombastic speeches at international events and the declarations and agreements that world political leaders sign are not accompanied by economic commitments.

From the ethical perspective, Cortina, a renowned moral thinker of Kantian filiation, in her book *Ética cosmopolita. Un apuesta por la cordura en tiempos de pandemia* [Cosmopolitan ethics: a bet for sanity in times of pandemic] (2021, p. 40) states that she has spent a number of years designing an ethics of cordial reason, a cordial or compassionate recognition that leads us to concern ourselves with justice, understood not as condescension, but as the capacity to share the happiness and suffering of those who recognise themselves as simultaneously autonomous and vulnerable. She tells us that taking *what is just* seriously does not make sense if this exigency does not emerge from a cordial reason, since we know the truth and justice not just through reasoning, but also through the heart. Therefore, the human

virtue par excellence is sanity, in which prudence, justice and *kardia*, the virtue of the lucid heart, come together. She shows us the guidelines for education in cordial ethics using the metaphor of *the dew that soaks the soil*, and she concludes that educating in compassion, in the capacity to be with others and to commit to them, is, in her view, the essential key to the humanist education that should be offered in the 21st century (Cortina, 2021, pp. 114–116).

For her part, Camps in *Tiempos de cuidados. Otra forma de estar en el mundo* [Times of care: another way of being in the world] (2021, pp. 32–33), affirms that modern ethics, when focussing on justice, pay scant attention to real situations of injustice. In contrast, care ethics have started to develop in our time along with the appearance of applied ethics, whose mission is to pose real and concrete problems in various social scenarios. In all of them, what matters is the context, the distinctive situation, more than the theory and even more that the principles. They are ethics *of cases* that start from the assumption that no solutions are valid for all situations, however similar they might appear. Considering the ethical value of care involves an attempt at universality, as happens with all ethical values. The current emergence of the ethical dimension of care, traditionally carried out by women, should not be seen as a battle of the sexes. It is a matter of shedding light on arrangements and activities that were kept in the shadows for centuries. Reclaiming essential practices that have not been recognised and are unequally shared.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The current model of *progress* is based on obsolete narratives and false myths that teach models that are not compatible with sustaining life on the planet because they perpetuate inequality and domination. In this sense, institutions, including universities, that truly wish to put care ethics at the centre of their quality policies, must take into account the need to make explicit certain elements of care which are otherwise not said and are all too often taken for granted in other settings such as the family; in other words, they must critically review how power is managed, its purpose and plurality (Tronto, 2010). In this way, care and justice could be coordinated so that times and life opportunities are readjusted to permit the democratisation of care, the conditions of justice to attain it, and the joint responsibility in the impacts it generates. We believe that this way of understanding the ethical and political dimension of the work of universities is more holistic and includes complexity.

Care ethics offer us conceptual and methodological tools to articulate narratives that make apparent the fact of the vulnerability of humans and of the planet and identify the problems with it. We need inspiring examples such as the one developed by the AAEER (*Australasian Association for Environmental Education Emerging Researchers*). This group of postgraduate students and early-career researchers have started out in their professional career by participating in a collaborative project that they regard as genuinely friendly, joyful and supportive, and which gives them the

opportunity to experience a collective, non-hierarchical and non-egotistical effort in knowledge-creation. They back the use of narration as a practice of inhabiting the “Chthulu” concept coined by Donna Haraway (2016) through practices and actions that turn them into agents for change with academia. In their own words: “we play with *Chthulu* as a figuration, as a storytelling tool to open possibilities to telling different stories, to enable different ways of relating” (AAEEER *et al.*, 2017, p. 149).

We argue that care ethics is a catalyst that can undo social isolation and fear, and so create connections that go beyond the dominant model. From the epistemologies and practices of care ethics, problems are not reduced to a set of algorithms, facts or data distanced from the relational and situational ties where they occur. We need to reconstruct forms of participation in order to build a democracy that takes into account the real needs of all people and redirects how employability is understood in universities. Part of the challenge we face is to understand the need to manage our own vulnerability prudently and to activate innovative educational, social, scientific, business, work, tax and economic models.

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